

Dentzel/Looff Carousel
(Casino Pier and Water Works, Carousel)
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
On the Boardwalk, between Grant
and Sherman avenues
Seaside Heights
Ocean County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1141

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DENTZEL/LOOFF CAROUSEL (Casino Pier and Water Works, Carousel)

HABS No. NJ-1141

Location: Casino Pier, on the Boardwalk, between Grant and Sherman Avenues, Seaside Heights, Ocean County, New Jersey

Present Owner: Robert Bennett
Casino Pier/Venice Amusement Corporation
800 Ocean Terrace
Seaside Heights, New Jersey 08751

Present Use: Amusement ride

Significance: This is one of the few remaining original amusement carousels on the New Jersey Shore with hand-carved animals. This machine is a Dentzel/Looft menagerie carousel, with some figures carved by other artists; it is an example of "Philadelphia" style carousel art. Music supplied by New Jersey's only continuously operated Wurlitzer military band organ (most carousels today use recorded music).¹

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Most of the carousel pieces date to 1910, although some of the animals were carved in the 1890s.
2. Architect: Most of the animals were carved by master craftsmen William Dentzel of Philadelphia, and Charles Looft of Coney Island, with other artists being Salvatore Conigliaro (of Italy), Charles Carmel, and Marcus Illions. The round enclosure was probably constructed by Linus Gilbert, a Princeton builder, though "Engineer Herbert (Porter?)" was also involved in setting up the carousel.²
3. Original and subsequent owners: In 1923 Joseph Endres and the Coast Amusement Company syndicate bought the F.P. Larkin tract (one block wide, ocean to railroad) for the purpose of amusement development. By 1932 Robert Merkel and Linus Gilbert, probably in partnership with others (again, probably, in a stock company known as Herbert Realty and Improvement Co.) bought the Larkin Tract from Coast Amusement Company, comprising about four acres. The Venice group (John Fitzgerald, John Christopher, and David Simon) bought the property from

¹ Floyd Moreland, "'A Trolley Park,' A Carousel; Another Carousel; and Finally New Jersey's Finest Family Amusement Town," unpublished manuscript; and Floyd Moreland, pamphlet, "The Floyd L. Moreland Historic Dentzel/Looft Carousel at Casino Pier," (1989).

² New York Times, Sunday, June 23, 1985; Moreland, pamphlet; and interview transcript, in possession of Dr. Floyd L. Moreland, carousel operator.

Gilbert about 1948. Simon sold his interest to the other two one year later, and Fitzgerald became sole owner in January 1960 when he bought out Christopher's interest after Christopher's death in 1959. The carousel is currently owned by Robert Bennett.³

4. Builders, suppliers: (see architect)
5. Alterations and Additions: A ring of original paintings on the stationary roundhouse were destroyed in the 1950s; mirrors (with horseheads emerging from them) have filled this space since 1976, replacing cartoon character paintings added when the originals were destroyed. Paintings also once decorated the lower enclosure panels.⁴

B. Historical Context:

Seaside Heights' history as an amusement industry site began only three years after its southern portion was subdivided as a real estate venture. Three men, all members of the Grosscup family, organized the Manhasset Realty Company in 1909 (in Camden) and purchased Seaside Heights' southern beachfront property. They laid out 855 lots, advertised in Camden and Philadelphia newspapers, and began excursion trains out to the shore. In 1915, the Manhasset Realty Company, no longer just a family endeavor, was trying to liquidate its last property with a promotional auction. The amusement industry moved into Seaside Heights that same year, when the Senate Amusement Company and Joseph B. Vanderslice of Philadelphia built a gasoline-powered merry-go-round and other amusements which failed in a year.⁵ Frank Freeman--a local builder and property owner--stepped in the next summer, installing an electric carousel from the Dentzel company, equipped with figures carved by Daniel Mueller. Freeman added other amusements, including an indoor dance hall, a skating rink, fishing pier, and arcades. This Freeman Amusement Center developed into a "trolley park," a destination integrally tied to rail transportation. Freeman would serve one term as mayor in 1920-1.⁶

A boardwalk fire destroyed this early carousel and its two band organs in 1955. A three-abreast merry-go-round was temporarily erected, but a committed citizen and businessman, Tunney, succeeded in relocating a 1917 Illions carousel from Coney Island. The temporary machine contributed some Carmel and Borelli figures to the permanent replacement. This carousel, still operated by family members, has 64 animals (originally 66), of which 56 move up and down. An ornate facade incorporating Illions' portrait remains, as does the carved rounding board, although the rounding board's paintings have been replaced, and the organ was removed. Many of the animals are heavily jeweled and elaborately carved. The flamboyant, ornate style of the Freeman carousel is in the "Coney Island" tradition of carving, and contrasts with the design of

³ Floyd Moreland, "A 'Trolley Park,'...;" June 4, 1937 newspaper clipping from unidentified paper, "Swimming Pool Ready for Opening; Huge Building Nearly Completed"; and undated clipping in Moreland's possession.

⁴ Moreland, pamphlet; Moreland, "'A Trolley Park'."

⁵ C. Byron Wortman, The First Fifty: A Biographical History of Seaside Heights, New Jersey (1963)

⁶ Floyd L. Moreland, "A 'Trolley Park,'; A Carousel; Another Carousel; And Finally New Jersey's Finest Family Amusement Town," unpublished manuscript.

the Dentzel/Looft carousel.⁷

The carousel, as described in detail in the "architectural character" section, is of the "Philadelphia" school of carousel carving--with gentler expressions on the animals and realistic rendering--and has been at its present site since 1932. In 1928, Princeton contractor Linus Gilbert bought the carousel from an old amusement park, Burlington Island Park, on an Island in the Delaware River between Philadelphia and Trenton.⁸ Burlington Island Park was heavily damaged by fire that year, and one of its developers, Robert Merkel, became involved in the Seaside Heights development, possibly through the sale of the Dentzel/Looft carousel. Gilbert constructed a 10-sided, unenclosed building for the machine, but this exposed the carousel to damaging weather, and the band organ induced complaints from some residential neighbors. It was also smaller and less elaborate than its Freeman competitor. At that time it was the only amusement at the boardwalk's north end, and its first years were lean ones.⁹

Within five years, however, L.R. Gilbert Construction Company incorporated the carousel into a larger arcade complex, notably including an olympic-sized swimming pool using chlorinated saltwater. Later owners (John Fitzgerald) added attractions and enlarged the fishing pier, which evolved into Casino Pier. The pool became a water park in 1987--Water Works. Robert Bennett now owns the Casino Pier and Water Works.¹⁰

In 1984, the carousel's owner intended to auction off the animals, but Dr. Floyd Moreland, professor at the City University of New York and long-time admirer of the carousel, convinced the owner to let him restore the ride with family and friends. These restorers named many of the animals. Only one or two hundred of the old carousel rides still operate, and more each year are dismantled.¹¹ Asbury Park recently auctioned off one carousel, and sold intact its 100 year old ferris wheel to another amusement park in the south.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The carousel is classified as a "mixed machine" since its 58 animals were carved by several artists. Master craftsmen William Dentzel of Philadelphia, and Charles Looft of Coney Island carved most of the figures, with other artists being Salvatore Conigliaro

⁷Ibid.

⁸ Burlington Island Park until 1917 had only a merry-go-round (probably the one under discussion), picnic tables, swings, and an open pavilion. In 1917 George Bassler and Robert Merkel expanded the park with a giant roller coaster and improved train and steamboat service. The Burlington Island Park operated as early as 1902, when it attracted more than 4,000 people. Shirley Bailey and Jim Parkhurst, Early South Jersey Amusement Parks (Millville, NJ: South Jersey Publishing Co., 1979), p.13

⁹ Moreland, "'A Trolley Park.'"

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Moreland, pamphlet; and M. Peryl King, "The Carousel," in Shore Heritage Newsletter, published by the Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission, Volume 13, No. 2 (Summer 1991), p.1.

(of Italy), Charles Carmel, and Marcus Illions. The carvings illustrate "the 'Philadelphia style' of carousel art, marked by an attention to realistic detail and sweet, inviting expressions on the faces of the animals."¹²

The 58 animals, 36 of which move up and down, include mostly horses, two camels, a tiger, lion, donkey, and two chariots. The incorporation of non-horse figures means that the carousel is labelled a "menagerie."

Eighteen paintings top the center casing; fifteen (or sixteen) of these paintings are original. Neoclassical castings, also original, surround the outer rim with floral patterns, lyres, and winged lion motifs.¹³

The Wurlitzer Organ:

The Wurlitzer Military Band Organ, built in 1923 (style 146A), operates with a pneumatic system using leather bellows; perforated music rolls generate the notes. Musical system's components include: snare and bass drums, cymbals, handmade wooden organ pipes, and a glockenspiel with 16 bell bars.¹⁴

The Enclosure:

The structure enclosing the carousel has three layers. The outer enclosure is a "castle" facade constructed about 1984 which unites the amusement complex underneath. In 1937 a one-story building enveloped the carousel and its housing. Finally, the interior layer is the 10-sided wood enclosure which was freestanding for several years before the 1937 complex was built.

For this simple enclosure, ten support columns slope inward to support a simple wood dome. According to Dr. Moreland, the building had open sides until 1937, but it did have louvered wood windows which have been removed. The entirely wood-frame building rests on a cement floor, on pilings.

2. Condition of fabric: The carousel is in very good condition.

Prepared by: Alison Isenberg
 HABS Historian
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¹² The two other major styles are "Coney Island" (see historic section), and the country fair style--a simpler design suited to the needs of a travelling show. Moreland, "A 'Trolley Park,'..."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Moreland, pamphlet.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Old views and primary and unpublished sources: Dr. Moreland has a collection of photographs, his own unpublished research, and assorted early newspaper clippings. See also:

Sebold, Kimberly, and Sara Amy Leach. Historic Themes and Resources within the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail: Southern New Jersey and the Delaware Bay. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1991.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian. The project was completed during summer 1992. The project historian was Alison Isenberg (University of Pennsylvania). The photography was produced by David Ames, University of Delaware, Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering.